

How Are You Doing? Key Performance Indicators and Benchmarking

Using KPIs and benchmarking allows you to demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of your programs and their management.

By John P. Fahey

As school business officials, we all need to “know and show” that our operations are well managed. To do so, we constantly ask ourselves questions, such as “How are we doing? How do we compare with others? Are we making progress fast enough? Are we using the best practices?”

Using key performance indicators (KPIs) and benchmarking as regular parts of our management routine is an important way for us to provide high-quality services to our students. They allow us to identify problem areas in our operations, to measure our progress in correcting those areas, and to demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of our programs. They can provide bragging rights if we exceed the norm and support for changes if we fall short.

Simply defined, a KPI is a measure of performance. This article focuses primarily on transportation, but the principles apply equally to all areas of K–12 noninstructional operations, such as facilities and food service.

Some examples of KPIs in the pupil transportation world include runs per bus, students per bus, miles per bus, cost per mile, cost per student, and average age of the fleet. For example, we can look at the number of runs Bus A makes daily (a KPI). Analyzing the KPI allows us to establish a best practice such as, “For the 2009–2010 school year,



each of our buses averaged 3.9 runs per day.” The best practice helps us evaluate or “benchmark” our performance: “I should be able to get as many runs per bus this year as I did last year.”

What and How to Measure

Our ability to accurately define the measure and consistently capture the correct data is key to creating

KPIs. Using standardized and controlled measurements is essential to the quality of the results. For example, measuring on-time performance is critical in benchmarking all transportation programs. To measure on-time performance, we might first ask, “When is a bus on time?” Is it on time when the driver reports to work, when it leaves the yard, when it arrives at its first stop, or when it arrives at the school? Is there an acceptable window for arrival at school? Is the bus considered on time as long as no one calls?

In New York’s Buffalo School District, we measured our on-time performance by what we called the “out-the-gate” time. Our automated routing software gave us a specific time when the bus needed to pull out of the yard in order to make the first pickup on time. We emphasized the importance of this time and it became the focus of drivers, monitors, mechanics, and dispatchers.

The bus’s performance was measured by its adherence to these out-the-gate times. Because our routes were well timed, we knew that if the bus started promptly, it usually arrived at school at the designated time, barring unforeseen circumstances. The daily percentage of buses heading out the gate on time became the KPI. Looking at those KPIs, we determined that 97.5% was a best practice, which then became our benchmark for each day’s operation.

